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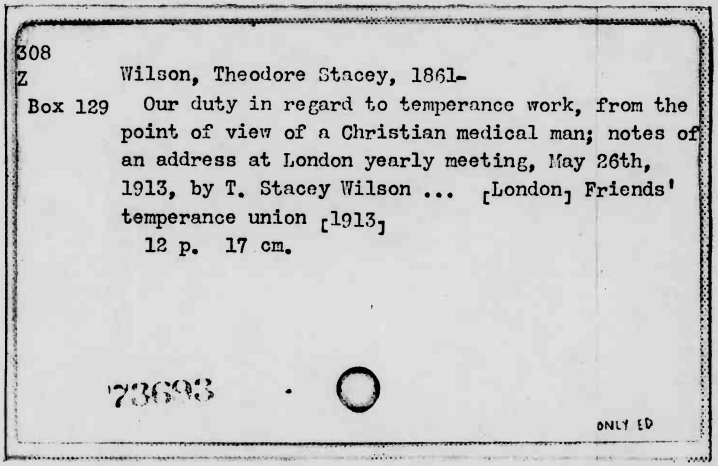
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Our Duty in Regard to Temperance Work:

From the Point of View of a Christian Medical Man.

T. Stacey Wilson, M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.P.

OUR DUTY IN REGARD TO TEMPERANCE WORK:

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW OF A CHRISTIAN MEDICAL MAN.

NOTES OF AN ADDRESS AT LONDON YEARLY MEETING, MAY 26TH, 1913.

BY

T. STACEY WILSON, M.D., B.Sc., F.R.C.P.

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Our Duty in Regard to Temperance Work.

I HAVE been asked to speak this evening upon our duty in regard to alcohol as it might be viewed from the standpoint of a Christian medical man and I shall therefore confine myself strictly within these limitations. Considering in the first place the medical use of alcohol, and then touching upon one or two aspects of alcohol in relation to the Christian life, which, from his association with pain and suffering, are apt to be somewhat forcibly impressed upon the observation of any medical man, whose ideals are at the same time Christian. The more closely one studies the effects of indulgence in alcohol in its relation to the higher moral life, the more evident is its deadening influence upon that higher life. Its action seems in all points to be directly antagonistic to all those influences which tend to raise the individual out of selfishness into the higher life of altruism which is the essence of Christianity.

ALCOHOL THE DECEIVER.

As regards the medical aspects of the use of alcohol it is quite extraordinary to notice to how many of its actions the title "Deceiver" is applicable. To it some such description would apply as that which the apostle James applied to the tongue for it is of insignificant medical value but boasteth great things. It appears to be doing much good, whereas any good it may seem to be doing is more than counterbalanced by some less evident

action which is really harmful. This deceitfulness of alcohol accounts for its popularity as a medicine in the past, when knowledge was not based, even as much as it is to-day, upon true scientific observation and experiment, and it also accounts for the fact that, with the increasing knowledge of the present day, alcohol is being less and less used in the treatment of our patients.

Some illustrations of this fact that alcohol is a deceiver will not be out of place here. One of the simplest and best illustrations of this is in the case of its frequent use for counteracting the effects of cold. On a cold day a man will take a glass of alcoholic drink to warm himself, and certainly it does produce a sense of warmth; but this is deceptive, for the action of the alcohol is in reality to further chill the man instead of warming him. When exposed to cold, nature ordains that all the small arteries in the skin shall be narrowed up in order to keep as much blood as possible in the centre of the body and as little as possible in the skin where it would be chilled by the action of the cold air. Alcohol reverses this beneficent provision of nature, and by allowing more blood to circulate at the surface of the body, makes the man feel warm for a time, albeit at the cost of an actual chilling of the body. Cases are, I believe, on record where out of several men exposed to the same dangerous degree of cold, those who had taken alcohol were frozen to death while those who had not, survived. Another well marked illustration of the deceitfulness of alcohol is observed in connection with experiments upon the quickness with which an individual can respond to certain given signals.

The experiments are conducted thus: The man is placed in a dark room and is told to press a certain electric button as soon as he sees a certain light. The quickness with which this is done

is measured and is found to vary greatly in different individuals, but in the case of any particular individual the quickness of his response is always lessened by alcohol, but, and this is the point, he always *thinks* he has done it more quickly after taking alcohol whereas the reverse is really the case. Other instances could be given of this.

This deceptive quality of alcohol might well account for the popularity that it used to have in the business world, though possibly its convivial qualities also had much to do with this. Here again the more carefully weighed experience of the present day has dethroned alcohol from this eminence, and the business man to-day recognises that he can do his work better without alcohol than with it. Witness our city clubs. In the club of which I have been a member since 1889, and which is popular amongst the leading business and professional men of the city, the amount of alcohol taken in the middle of the day has very greatly diminished. Twenty-five years ago, the man who took no alcohol with his midday meal was the exception, and there would often be only two or three such as against forty or fifty who were having it, whereas to-day the numbers are reversed, and by far the majority of business and professional men at this club do not take alcohol with their lunch.

DECEPTIVE AS A MEDICINE.

In the use of alcohol purely as a medicine this same deceitfulness is apt to be manifested. For instance, twenty years ago, we regularly used to give alcohol in cases of heart failure, and found that it increased the strength of the pulse, but we now know that to give alcohol in cases of heart weakness closely resembles the unwise proceeding of unduly flogging a horse that is thoroughly exhausted. Although the

horse may for a time quicken his pace, it is at the expense of greater exhaustion afterwards, and the likelihood of his being able to reach his journey's end is lessened. Moreover if the horse be a high spirited one, the risk of his falling dead on the road will be greatly increased by such action. Again, I could mention certain kinds of illness with which pain is associated where alcohol gives great relief; but it is an evil day for the patient when this is discovered, for the effect of the alcohol is to keep up the illness which causes the pain, and thus prevent all chance of a cure.

Another instance of this same action is in the case of fevers, and other forms of illness due to one kind of infection or another. Here the apparent good which alcohol may do is far more than counteracted by the insidious power which we know that it possesses of lessening the ability of the body to repel the attacks of the germs which are the cause of the disease. Recovery from this type of illness depends upon the resistance which the tissues of the body can offer, to the attacks of the germs, and alcohol, as we now know, greatly interferes with that power of resistance.

ALCOHOL IN CONVALESCENCE.

Lastly, I need only say a few words as to the well-known power of causing a sense of well-being and of comfort. However much it may be disagreeing with and injuring the person who is taking it, its immediate effect is to make him feel so much the better for what he has taken that he is deceived and made to think that its effect is wholly good. For this amongst other reasons it should never be taken during convalescence from illness. Convalescence is a time of returning strength and increasing comfort after the discomforts of illness, and the convalescent who takes alcohol is only too apt to gain an

exaggerated idea as to its efficiency, owing to the deceptive character of the temporary sense of comfort which it induces. In a weak-willed individual, an undue indulgence in alcohol often results from his having been unwisely ordered to take it during convalescence. The danger of the medicated wines, such as Wincarnis, so largely advertised at the present day, is terribly great on this account. The advertisements lay great stress upon their value to the convalescent.

Year by year we are getting a clearer insight into the disadvantages of alcohol, and therefore less and less is being given by medical men to their patients.

Hospital statistics all over the country are eloquent in this respect and I may perhaps add to those already given by saying that in the case of our leading Birmingham hospital, when I first became associated with it, in 1885, as resident medical officer, the annual amount of wine and spirits supplied to the 237 patients was 213 gallons, or 7.2 pints per head per annum. At the present day with 314 patients, it is only 65½ gallons or 1.4 pints per head, instead of 7. In the case of the wine the figures are very striking. In 1885 137 gallons were supplied to the 237 patients or 4.6 pints per head, whereas in 1912 only 15½ gallons were supplied to the 314 patients or less than ½ a pint per head per annum.

I feel therefore quite clear in saying that as a medical man it is my duty to do all that I can to discourage in all but very exceptional instances the giving of alcohol to my patients. This same judgment is fully endorsed by our leading Birmingham Surgeon who is also Vice-Chancellor of our University and a man of wide experience, for recently at a public meeting in our Town Hall he used the following words: "I say as emphatically as I can that to no one is alcohol a necessity," more work and better can be done

without alcohol than with it. It is of "no real use to the transaction of business." In acute disease or sudden injury the steady, constant drinker's chance of recovery was diminished 50 per cent.

I now come to the second part of my subject and shall endeavour to show that alcohol is calculated to interfere in the most striking manner with the development of the true Christian character in the case of any one who takes it otherwise than in extreme moderation.

ALCOHOL AND CHRISTIAN CHARACTER.

In thinking of alcohol in its relation to the development of the Christian character, we must consider that character from two points of view. First, in so far as the perfection of the individual is concerned, and secondly, in connection with his relationship with his fellow men. The effects of alcohol are such as to interfere with the development of Christian character in both respects.

Firstly, as regards the individual himself. I need not do more than refer to the important part which self-control plays in the perfection of the character, and to the well-known effect of alcohol in lessening in many ways that power of self-control. Also I need not, in this gathering do more than refer to the destructive effect of intemperance upon family life and the family love which is so essential to the Christian upbringing of each new generation. The fascination of alcohol which leads the intemperate parent to neglect the temporal and moral welfare of the other members of the family in order to gratify the craving which alcohol causes, is so well known, that I need not take up valuable time by dwelling upon the point.

There is however another way in which alcohol interferes with the perfect development of the individual Christian character which is not quite so self-evident. Defects of character are

apt to result in circumstances the reverse of pleasant for the individual, but if "patience is allowed to have its perfect work," the man reaps the benefit of the suffering, and his character is purified and his self-control strengthened as the result of the suffering. But if, instead of recognising that he has brought this trouble upon himself and allowing that thought to strengthen him against a similar failure in the future, he does what a man who takes alcohol is only too tempted to do, namely, seeks temporary escape from his trouble—whatever it may be—by means of the oblivion which alcohol can bring about, he loses thereby the purifying effect upon his character which his trouble would otherwise have. His character is doubly deteriorated by this act of cowardice. If he had faced his self-caused trouble and done his best to live it down or remedy it if possible, he might have come out the stronger and better for his moral lapse.

ALCOHOL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY.

The deadening effect of alcohol is even more evident when we think out its action in connection with the development of the Christian character so far as it concerns a man's relation to his fellow-men. To make this important point a little clearer I must be allowed a slight digression in order to analyse a little closely some of the main principles which actuate the Christian man and make him different from the man whose ideal is not definitely Christian.

Let us as men who only have powers of human thought ask ourselves what it was, so far as we can see, that made Christ play the part He did for the elevation of the human race? What ideal has He set before us which we as ordinary men can copy? That aspect of His life on earth which is commonly spoken of as His atoning work is on a plane beyond that of our human nature and deals with the divine side of His

work. It is beyond the true range of our human thought.

May we not from our point of view say that Christ possessed something which the human race did not possess and that He wanted them to share it?

His knowledge enabled Him to understand the incompleteness of life on earth without that something, and His sensitiveness enabled Him to *feel how* poor life was without it, and how much richer the life of mankind would be if He were to impart to them that which He was able to impart. In trying to analyse by the aid of our human intellects Christ's love to man, two points seem to come out clearly: His perception of man's need and His power of feeling what mankind suffered as a result of that need. Those two characteristics will, I think, be generally accepted as fundamentally important elements in the ideal Christian character, and we can call them Knowledge and Sympathy.

KNOWLEDGE AND SYMPATHY.

In looking at the ideal Christian character from this point of view, we can see that the action of alcohol is likely to be most potent in hindering its development, in both the directions of which we have spoken. To deal with knowledge first. If we are really to minister to the needs of our day and generation, our first requisite is to know something of these needs. Our thoughts must go out beyond our own lives and our own interests to the lives of those about us. Now the deadening effect of alcohol, if taken in full measure, is most fatal in hindering the development of this faculty. It narrows a man's outlook, makes him more content with things as they are even when it is not taken to the extent of absolute intemperance. Such a man is less likely to be worried and anxious about the condition of his fellow-men than he would be if he

did not indulge in alcohol. If anyone questions this statement it is only necessary to point to the frequency with which men take alcohol in order to escape through its soothing action from worry or anxiety of any kind. Further knowledge of the needs of others becomes more real and intense to us when we in our lives have experienced that same need. Therefore what I am about to say as to the deadening effect of alcohol upon human sympathy also applies here. For lessened sympathy with the needs of others must result in limitation of our knowledge also.

I now come to my second point, namely, sympathy. That is the power of actually putting ourselves into the position of those we are trying to help and feeling their need or their suffering.

The power of sympathy is fundamental for all true Christian service. The need for it is often dwelt upon in the New Testament in such passages as Paul's exhortation to the Galatians "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ." As our power of bearing one another's burdens depends very largely upon our having experienced the weight of similar burdens in our own lives, it follows that those who would enter into the highest form of Christian service must enter in through the gate of suffering. Would the life of Christ on earth be to us what it was if we could not feel that He was "made perfect through suffering," that He was "in all points tempted and tried as we are"? We are very familiar with this thought in both poetry and prose in such passages as this:

"For Love's strength standeth in Love's sacrifice,
And he who suffers most has most to give."

Any man who has experienced the effect of full doses of alcohol is sorely tempted to escape from any pain or suffering he is called upon to bear by resorting to the soothing effect upon

mind and body which results for a time from its action. A friend of mine whose sterling moral fibre had enabled him to pass with ease through temptations in youth and early manhood which would have sorely tried any one less strong, used to speak to me in scathing terms of those who were weak enough to give way to intemperance, and would not infrequently use such terms as brute or beast when speaking to me of a drunken man or woman. He could not understand such weakness until it happened that his only and greatly loved daughter hung between life and death for several days, owing to a dangerous illness. After this experience, however, he confessed to me that the effect of his grief and anxiety was to tempt him in a way, and with a strength he had not dreamt was possible, to take a drink in order to escape, if only for a few minutes, from his terrible anxiety. After this experience I never again heard him use the same strong language about those who gave way to the temptation to intemperance.

If we look, as we ought to do, upon trials of one sort or another as sent to us in order to enlarge our sympathy and so fit us more perfectly for special work which God has for us to do, to endeavour to escape what we are called upon to bear by deadening our sensibility by alcohol would not only be cowardice but would result in grievous loss to ourselves and also to those whom God intended us to help. Looked at in this way we cannot but realise the deadening effect that alcohol has upon the highest form of Christian character, by hindering the development of the essential qualities of Knowledge and Sympathy.

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